

# The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T. S. Eliot

## BEFORE YOU READ

### LITERARY FOCUS: DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AND STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

A **dramatic monologue** is a poem in which one character speaks directly to one or more listeners. In Eliot's poem the words are spoken by a man named Prufrock. In a dramatic monologue, you learn everything about the setting, the situation, supporting characters, and even the speaker's own personality from the speaker's words. Like people in real life, speakers in dramatic monologues give their own spin to the events and circumstances around them. As you read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," you will begin to see the world as Prufrock sees it. Is it the way you see the world?

One reason that Eliot's poem may seem difficult at first is that it uses a **stream-of-consciousness** technique. With stream of consciousness, the writer tries to imitate the natural flow of a character's thoughts, memories, and reflections as the character experiences them. In attempting to capture the random movement of a character's thoughts, the logical connections and transitions of ordinary prose are often left out. Instead, the character jumps from one idea or association to another, as one thought suddenly triggers another, seemingly unrelated, one.

### READING SKILLS: IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEAS

The **main idea** of a passage or a work of literature is its most important message, opinion, or lesson. Identifying the main ideas will help you better understand the meaning of a selection. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," look for main ideas about war (the poem was published during World War I), people, and life.



## REVIEW SKILLS

As you read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," look for the following literary device.

### CHARACTER TRAITS

The qualities that a character in a work of literature displays, such as values, habits, likes, and dislikes.



### Reading Standard 3.1

Analyze characteristics of subgenres (dramatic monologue).

### Reading Standard 3.4 (Grade 9–10 Review)

Determine characters' traits by what the characters say about themselves in narration, dialogue, dramatic monologue, and soliloquy.

# The LOVE SONG of J. Alfred Prufrock

T. S. Eliot

## BACKGROUND

Thomas Stearns Eliot—known to readers as T. S. Eliot—was born in St. Louis to an intellectual family with deep New England roots. After graduating from Harvard, Eliot studied for a time in Paris and then moved to London to begin his career as a poet. In 1915, just a year after the outbreak of World War I, Eliot published “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” the poem that made him famous.

“Prufrock” captures the mood of helpless paralysis that many Europeans and Americans felt in the face of the modern forces of technology and industrialism. The individual no longer seemed to count for anything; the war in Europe had quickly turned into a mechanized slaughter in which millions of young men were losing their lives, it seemed, for nothing.

## DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

Circle the pronouns in line 1 that indicate this is a **dramatic monologue**, a poem whose speaker addresses one or more listeners.

## INTERPRET

Given the startling **simile**—a comparison using *like*, *as*, or *than*—in lines 2–3, how do you picture the evening?

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*S'io credessi che mia risposta fosse  
a persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
questa fiamma staria senza più scosse.  
Ma per ciò che giammai di questo fondo  
non tornò vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*<sup>1</sup>

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherized<sup>2</sup> upon a table;  
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

1. This quotation is from Dante's epic poem *The Divine Comedy* (1321). The speaker is Guido da Montefeltro, a man sent to Hell for dispensing evil advice. He speaks from a flame that quivers when he talks: “If I thought my answer were to one who ever could return to the world, this flame should shake no more; but since none ever did return alive from this depth, if what I hear be true, without fear of infamy I answer this” (*Inferno*, Canto 27, lines 61–66). Think of Prufrock as speaking from his own personal hell.
2. **etherized**: anesthetized; paralyzed.

- 5 The muttering retreats  
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
Of insidious intent
- 10 To lead you to an overwhelming question . . .  
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.<sup>3</sup>

- 15 The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
- 20 Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,  
And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

- And indeed there will be time  
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street
- 25 Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;  
There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
There will be time to murder and create,  
And time for all the works and days of hands
- 30 That lift and drop a question on your plate;  
Time for you and time for me,  
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

3. **Michelangelo:** Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), a great artist of the Italian Renaissance.

#### INFER

Where does the speaker want to take his companion in lines 4–7? Who might his companion be?

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#### IDENTIFY

What is the fog compared to in the **extended metaphor** in lines 15–22? Underline words and phrases that develop the comparison.

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#### IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS

In lines 23–34, circle the words that are repeated. How would you state the **main idea** of this stanza?

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### FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage aloud twice. Focus on conveying simple meaning the first time around. During your second reading, try to bring the speaker's words to life.

### DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

What do you learn about Prufrock's **character traits** from what he says about himself in lines 37–48?  
(*Grade 9–10 Review*)

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### INTERPRET

How would you describe a life measured out by coffee spoons (line 51)?

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35 In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time  
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”  
Time to turn back and descend the stair,  
40 With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—  
(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)  
My morning coat,<sup>4</sup> my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—  
(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)  
45 Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all—  
50 Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,  
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
I know the voices dying with a dying fall<sup>5</sup>  
Beneath the music from a farther room.  
So how should I presume?

55 And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated<sup>6</sup> phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
60 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?

4. **morning coat**: formal daytime dress for men.

5. **dying fall**: in music, notes that fade away.

6. **formulated** v. used as *adj.*: reduced to a formula and made insignificant.

- And I have known the arms already, known them all—  
 Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
 (But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
- 65 Is it perfume from a dress  
 That makes me so digress?  
 Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
     And should I then presume?  
     And how should I begin?  
     . . . . .
- 70 Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets  
 And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
 Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .
- I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
 Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.  
     . . . . .
- 75 And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!  
 Smoothed by long fingers,  
 Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,<sup>7</sup>  
 Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
 Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
 80 Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?  
 But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
 Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald)  
     brought in upon a platter,<sup>8</sup>  
 I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;  
 I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
 85 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat,  
     and snicker,

7. **malingers**: pretends to be sick to get out of work or duty.

8. **my head . . . a platter**: biblical allusion to the execution of John the Baptist (Mark 6:17–28; Matthew 14:3–11). The dancing of Salome so pleased Herod Antipas, ruler of ancient Galilee, that he offered her any reward she desired. Goaded by her mother, who hated John, Salome asked for John's head. Herod ordered the prophet beheaded and his head delivered on a serving plate.

#### INTERPRET

What does Prufrock compare himself to in lines 57–58? What does this **metaphor** tell you about him?

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#### IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS

Prufrock wonders if he should tell his story, then decides to begin. What **main idea** about life does he express in lines 70–72?

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#### INTERPRET

The “eternal Footman” is a **metaphor** for death. What vision of his future does Prufrock see in line 85?

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### IDENTIFY MAIN IDEAS

Re-read lines 90–98. What is Prufrock afraid would happen if he tried to explain his views of the world?

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### DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

The speaker continues to ask questions of his listener(s) in lines 99–110. Underline the question he repeats.

### INTERPRET

What do you think the woman in lines 96–98 and 107–110 **symbolizes**, or represents?

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And in short, I was afraid.  
And would it have been worth it, after all,  
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
90 Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,  
To say: “I am Lazarus,<sup>9</sup> come from the dead,  
95 Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all”—  
If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
Should say: “That is not what I meant at all.  
That is not it, at all.”

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
100 Would it have been worth while,  
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail  
along the floor—  
And this, and so much more?—  
It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
But as if a magic lantern<sup>10</sup> threw the nerves in patterns on a  
105 screen:  
Would it have been worth while  
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:  
“That is not it at all,  
110 That is not what I meant, at all.”  
. . . . .

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress,<sup>11</sup> start a scene or two,

9. **Lazarus:** In the Bible, a man that Jesus brought back from the dead (John 11: 38–44).

10. **magic lantern:** early type of projector that could magnify and project images.

11. **swell a progress:** fill out a scene in a play or pageant by serving as an extra.

- Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
 115 Deferential, glad to be of use,  
 Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
 Full of high sentence,<sup>12</sup> but a bit obtuse;<sup>13</sup>  
 At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
 Almost, at times, the Fool.
- 120 I grow old . . . I grow old . . .  
 I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
- Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.  
 I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.
- 125 I do not think that they will sing to me.
- I have seen them riding seaward on the waves  
 Combing the white hair of the waves blown back  
 When the wind blows the water white and black.
- We have lingered in the chambers of the sea  
 130 By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

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12. **high sentence:** pompous talk.

13. **obtuse:** slow to understand.

### DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

The speaker says he is not Prince Hamlet. Instead, he describes himself as another character in Shakespeare's play: Polonius, a foolish old advisor to the king. Underline the **character traits** Prufrock gives himself in lines 115–119. (*Grade 9–10 Review*)

### INFER

The style of Prufrock's time called for fashionable young men to turn up the cuffs of their trousers. How do you think Prufrock approaches growing old (lines 120–123)?

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### INTERPRET

In lines 124–125, what do the mermaids **symbolize**? If they don't sing for Prufrock, what will he miss in life?

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## The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

**Reading Skills: Identifying Main Ideas** The chart below lists four **main ideas** from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” In the right column, fill in at least two passages from the poem to support each main idea.

Main Idea	Lines from the Poem
People lead lonely existences.	
People have trouble communicating their feelings.	
People have a hard time being decisive.	
Ordinary life keeps people from following their dreams.	



Check your Standards Mastery at the back of this book.